



Puck Rogers shows off a turnip he harvested.

Photo by Kate Haag Rogers.

Eating Your Homework: One Family's Intersections of Science, Place, Foodways, and Education

by Lisa L. Higgins and Katherine Haag Rogers

My son thinks he will be considered a man when he learns to make my hummus and his father's mustard recipe¹.

--Kate Haag Rogers

When families merge, they bring their stories, histories, and traditions together. This process is made especially clear as cultures and experiences mingle and collide on the family table. Cognizance of why we eat what we eat can be taught to preserve the history of the meal and shape the new narrative to be passed along as the future's history. About two decades ago, we—Lisa Higgins and Kate Haag Rogers—joined the same family, first in courtship and later in marriage. As relationships formed and grew, we brought our own ideas about food and found that although the food was not the same our interest in it was common ground.

Our spouses are siblings, an older sister and her younger brother, who were born just north of Kansas City and moved periodically, following their father's jobs. As they branched out, moving farther away from their roots, the Rogers family of four, our in-laws and their two children, sustained family connections with traditions, many rooted in foodways. Each time they uprooted and then resettled, the Rogers family planted a garden. When we joined them, we were drawn into this world of gardening and sharing their bounty as a matter of course. To this day, through long careers and into retirement, our family's elders garden; they preserve, can, and freeze what they grow, and they serve these fruits of their labor. Their two-car garage serves as a modern root cellar, home to full freezers and a bank of shelves lined with rows and rows of jars: jellies, jams, vegetables, pickles, relishes, and more. These homegrown and preserved foods have found their way to the tables of their children's families and, with them, the stories about these food traditions.

We quickly learned, usually around a dinner table, that there are family legends about the processes and products of the Rogers' family gardens—the good, the bad, and the infamous “canned patty pan squash.” These stories, and the annual reports from the garden, serve as the basis for many communications. They are told at family gatherings and at the table with the grandchildren. These stories are the second preserving of the fruits of the elders' labor. We, the newcomers to the family,



A corner of our in-laws' two-car garage is home to preserved foods from their garden.

Photo by Lisa L. Higgins.

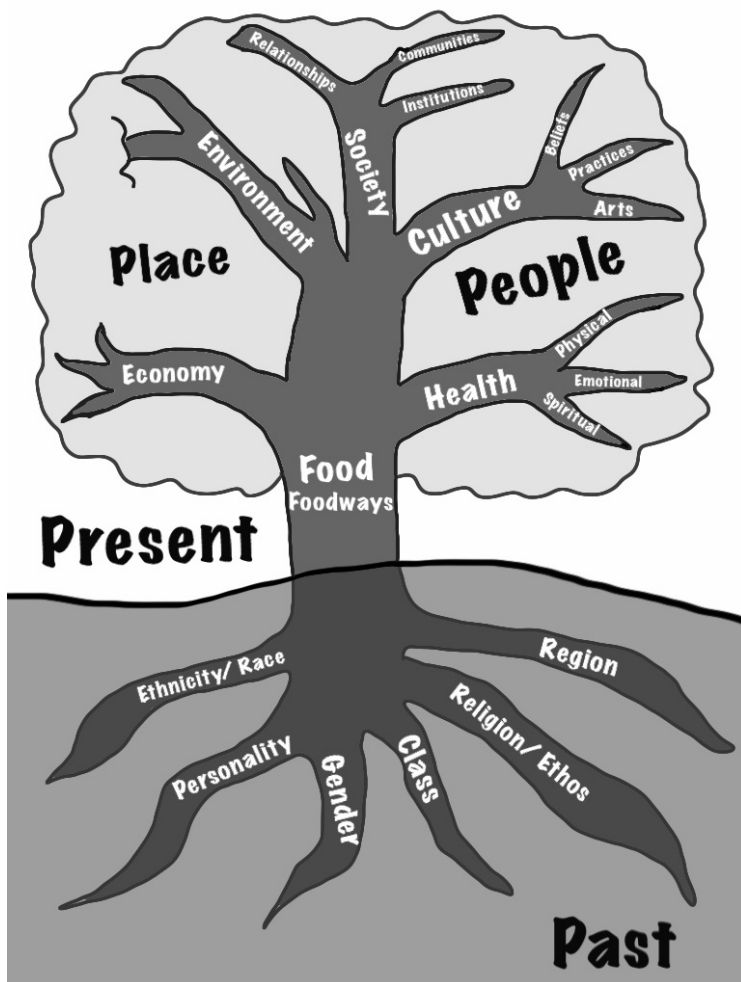


Figure 1. Dr. Lucy Long's Tree of Connections.
Courtesy Lucy Long.

also came into the fold with our own family foodways from the Mid-South and Upper Midwest. We, too, came from families who moved away from our families' roots to follow our fathers' careers. The array of traditions has merged, emerged, and evolved in our individual homes and at our collective gatherings at holidays, birthdays, weddings, and funerals. Our stories are braided with theirs in dishes old and new.

As global and local food systems change, Kate, who works as a community educator and in ethical food advocacy, has made it her mission to teach the next generation in the family about the food they eat so that the family histories can be preserved and so the children are aware of all the people and places that are part of their nourishment. The stories that were once simple have become more complex but, in Kate's eyes, no less important.

When the folklorist in the family, Lisa, attended a Future of American Folklore Conference in 2017 in Bloomington, Indiana, she found herself texting quotations and thoughts to Kate, the family farmer and homeschooler. In particular, during the session Applying Folkloristic Understandings of Food to Current Social Issues: Sustainability, Social Equity, and Diversity, panelist Lucy Long shared a graphic from [*Foodways Traditions of Northwest Ohio*](#) called the Tree of Connections. In the graphic of a tree, Long grounds her theory of food traditions in soil, roots, trunk, and branches—the past, present, place, and people (Figure 1).

In essence, we sisters-in-law found the Tree of Connections resonated not only

with our experiences in the Rogers family and in our families of origin but also in Kate's food advocacy work. We began to correspond via email and text, and we set up a Google Drive folder to "free write" about our family foodways. Lisa shared a foodways lesson from the Missouri Folk Arts Program's *Show-Me Traditions: An Educators' Guide to Teaching Folk Arts and Folklife in Missouri Schools*, which led to several paragraphs from each about family recipes and gardens. From the Foodways Vocabulary Worksheet (See pg. 62), we extemporized about the food we grew up eating—and avoiding: Kate holds dear childhood memories of kolaches, bratwurst, kraut, and pierogi. Lisa's family loves chocolate gravy over biscuits, turkey with cornbread dressing, black-eyed peas, and pink fluff Jell-O "salad." Kate's family ate handmade Bohemian breads from Vesecky's Bakery in Berwyn, Illinois. Lisa's family ate Wonder Bread and Hostess cakes straight off the truck after her father finished his route. Kate's great-grandparents owned an urban butcher shop down the street from the bakery. Lisa's great-grandparents butchered hogs in the winter on their farms in rural Arkansas.

From the vocabulary worksheet, we shifted our discussion to stories about recipes. Prized recipes. Family cookbooks. Great-grandma Daisy Belle's secret mustard recipe. Our mother-in-law's pumpkin pie squares. Kate's nondairy revision of the pumpkin squares. Lisa's mother's Thanksgiving cornbread dressing recipe, and Lisa's gluten-free revision of the dressing. In fact, we spend a lot of time thinking, texting, and sometimes talking about revisions to make recipes nondairy and gluten-free—especially before one of our bountiful, but rare, family meals when we can gather together in Georgia or Missouri. Allergens and vegetarianism are

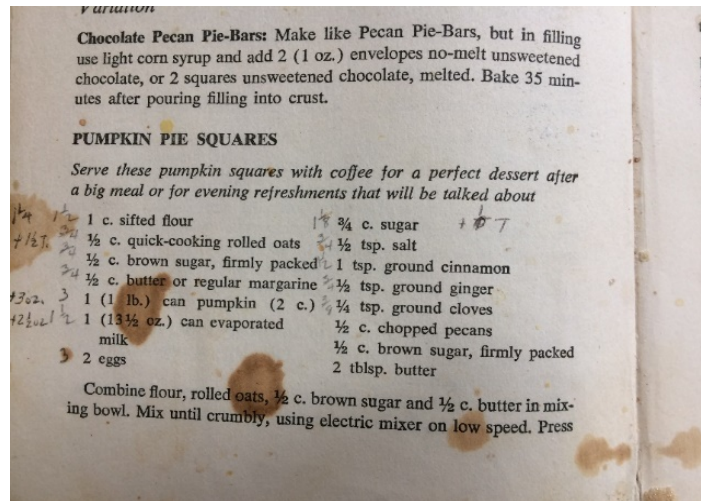


Figure 2. Our mother-in-law bakes pumpkin pie squares for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Her preferred recipe from the *Farm Journal's Complete Home Baking Book* is well-worn and stained and includes her notes for adjusting servings.

Photo by Lisa L. Higgins.

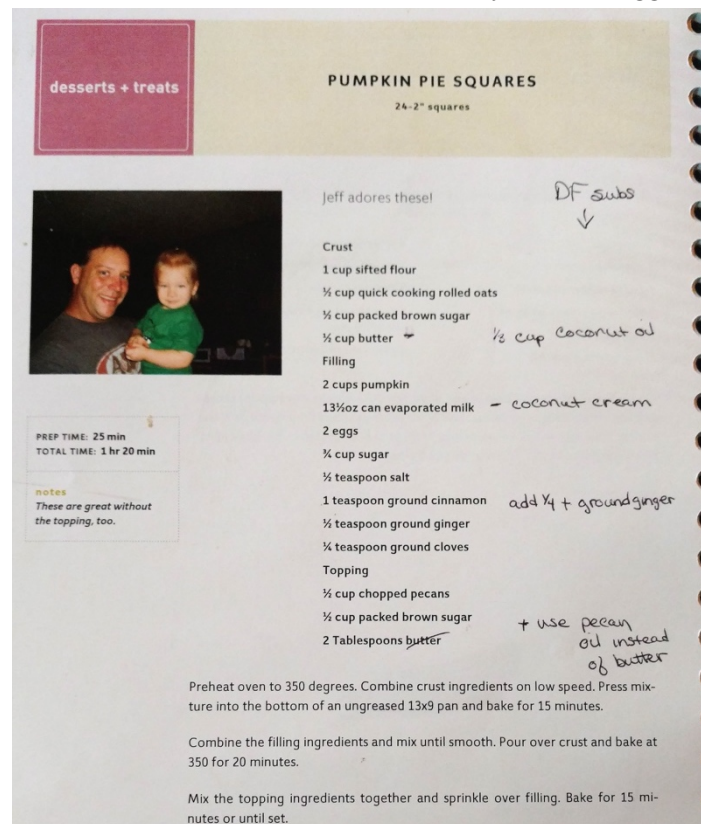


Figure 3. Kate included our mother-in-law's pumpkin pie square recipe in a family cookbook. Kate has made notes to make the recipe dairy-free for her children.

Photo by Kate Haag Rogers.

two key reasons that Kate's family garden grew into a hobby farm. A holistic education is another reason (Figures 2 and 3, Pumpkin Squares Recipes).

Kate, her husband, and their two children—affectionately called “Melon” and “Puck”—have lived in rural Southeast Georgia since the spring of 2011. Like the previous generation, this family has moved often to follow a career. Like the previous generation, this one resettles in new locations by tilling and planting gardens: “We move a lot. Getting adjusted to a new community, especially in rural areas, means adjusting to the local food culture.” In Georgia, Kate and family went a giant step beyond, working years to amend the soil and establish a hobby farm with chickens, guineas, and horses. They started a CSA program (community supported agriculture), and Kate is very active in the local homestead guild and its weekly summer market.

In 2015, she started blogging at [*Katy Had a Little Farm*](#) and describes herself as:

An ethical food advocate, writer, and community educator, I am also a wife, mother, volunteer and friend. Formally educated at a large Midwestern university, but an obsessive autodidact, I walked away from conventional agriculture and politics to devote myself to the health of my family and community.

My goal is to reduce the toxic load on our bodies, help people become cognizant eaters, and support an ethical food system. Clean food and real food are the focus of this paradigm shift.

Over the last seven years in rural Southeast Georgia, these two transplanted Midwesterners have nurtured their family and their farm side by side. Our families keep in touch with occasional visits, frequent phone calls, texts, Facebook, and Kate's blog. *Katy Had a Little Farm* is where our family learns more than we might otherwise about her pedagogy of the farm. Lisa, as a folklorist, is particularly curious and asks questions about the ways that Kate and family, outsiders to the region, established their place in the local community so firmly. She responded:

When we moved to the Southeast, we were really excited about all the things we could grow here that we'd never been able to grow elsewhere. We planted citrus trees, pomegranates, figs, and peanuts before our boxes were unpacked. We soon learned few people were still eating these local fruits. While we waited for our own plants to produce, we were able to glean from prolific plants that no one else wanted.

As we got used to the local restaurants and grocery stores, we were surprised that the food we associated with the region seemed largely absent, with the exceptions of sweet tea and instant grits. The drive-throughs were full, and the few local restaurants were serving the same fare one could find off any Interstate. What had happened to the southern fare we anticipated? Was this all that was left of southern food?

Through gardening and networking, we started getting a feel for the area, both our piece of land and the local culture. We stopped and talked to other gardeners, we

started a CSA garden from our farm, and we started learning about the region's food from people who remembered when it was made at home, collecting stories of what grandmothers served and children foraged before convenience ruled. We just had to peel back the recent layer until we got to food with meaning.

As the waiting list for our small CSA grew, so, too, did our food-based community. Slowly, the food on our table started to include stewed local greens, shrimp and fish from the closest coasts, heirloom grits, more okra, and Scotch bonnets. We grew an old variety of peanut and chewed sugarcane while we attended our first cane boil. Our table was growing to include our new community.

A group of us—eaters, farmers, teachers, and chefs—became a guild affiliated with our regional Okefenokee Heritage Center with the goals of promoting local food and supporting local farmers and artisans. We started a producer-only, local fare market that is going into its fourth year. Then we added an annual farm-to-fork meal and a homesteading conference. We offer local producers a place to sell their food, not just at the market but also through a co-op program. We provide volunteers and help with school gardens, work to bring local food into school lunchrooms, and host classes about food production and cooking. We partner with Saint Andrew's Society to glean fields and give away the food. We work with another community organization to teach food-insecure families how to prepare the foods they can get locally and seasonally so they can get the most quality and quantity from their resources.

These relationships between community members, local chefs, and farmers have helped revive the foods of the region and, by doing so, created common ground for people who otherwise may never have bonded. At our market, Chef Andy, billed as the Pop-Up Chef, takes anything the farmers are selling that day and turns it into samples. He teaches shoppers simple ways to use the products of the soil from our own area. Then, the farmers sell out of the products they brought that day.

There are no instant grits at the market. There are blue, white, and yellow grits, but no instant. I know how to make them now. There are no eggs from a windowless egg factory. Instead, there are eggs from a local farmer who knows most of her hundred hens by name and packs their eggs, four colors to a dozen, so customers smile when they open the carton. Market customers can enjoy these eggs with the sausage from her hogs, the biscuits her husband, another chef, makes, and the goat cheese from our local pastured dairy. Who needs a drive-through?

The market's produce farmers are there to tell how to stew greens or which tomatoes to use on a tomato and mayo sandwich. They can share the stories of how okra may have been transported by African slaves to the region and explain why the onions of this area are so outstanding. Folks can take home a bag of local shrimp from the people who caught it, and a mess of BBQ. Ours is a community built around passion and curiosity, and a community that never could have happened in a grocer or drive-through.

We insisted on eating this place, and it turned out we weren't the only ones who wanted to do that. In the summer, we forage for blackberries, figs, and loquats. In the fall, we glean pecans while many locals hunt for wild boar to make into sausage. There is a truck that parks in the same spot every year to sell green boiled peanuts on the side of the road. Another sells watermelons in the summer and turnips in the fall. We chew cane on the porch in the hot fall air and go to cane boils when it cools off. People are still doing these things. No one could see them from the drive-through. Since the rise of this local food movement, the number of people gardening has grown exponentially. The message resonates.

In addition to her curiosity about how the family found common ground as newcomers to the community, Lisa, always wearing her folklorist hat, was intrigued by Melon and Puck's homeschool education, which is so different from her own. Lisa has spent decades in the study of folklore as a student, scholar, and arts administrator. Overall, she credits those roles, where she met and formed relationships with an array of tradition bearers, as educational and catalysts for personal understanding, including with foodways.

Among my family and long-time friends, it has mostly been a given that I am (or was) a very picky eater. I was the stubborn child often left to sit at the supper table while my glass of milk grew warm and my dinner grew cold. My parents didn't operate as short-order cooks or cater to my limited palate, but they did allow me to fend for myself, as a loaf of enriched "white" bread and a jar of peanut butter were always in our cabinets. Often when I reflect on Thanksgiving meals, as many U.S. folklorists do with students and workshop participants, I recall that my grandmothers' tables were overflowing with bounties of roasted meat, vegetables, casseroles, and desserts. My plate was sad and fairly empty, usually only slices of ham and whipped potatoes, which I ate to have my share of cookies and pie (filling only—no crust). The maturity of my palate was so delayed that I can vividly recall when I first tried many foods, especially vegetables.

While both my grandmothers were avid gardeners, in my nuclear childhood family we had no gardens. We adopted convenience foods readily, although my mother, a huge fan of vegetables, usually had a family connection to supply her with squash, tomatoes, peas, and okra. She was a fan of u-pick fruit farms, and she often took us to strawberry patches to gather all we could. My paternal grandmother had a vast vegetable garden that stretched across the southern edges of three backyards. Gardening was a necessity all her life, even when she moved herself and six children into town. My maternal grandmother, too, gardened and cooked from her harvests. Today when I am digging in dirt it is almost always to tend to flower beds and pots, filled with striped petunias, irises, peonies, and hydrangeas. I have been in search of my mothers' flower gardens more than their vegetable gardens.

Working as a folklorist, too, expanded my palate. In the field, it is a cardinal rule to accept graciously what tradition bearers offer during site visits and other occasions. In the mid-1990s, I worked as a graduate assistant and accompanied

Dana Everts-Boehm, then director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program, to document an apprenticeship between a master maker of low-rider cars and his apprentice in a predominantly LatinX region of Kansas City. We spent time in the family's garage, and in the kitchen, where we observed firsthand the making of traditional Mexican favorite dishes, most of which I had never eaten before and never would have tried of my own accord. Not only did I sample every dish, I took home a sampling of desserts to share with my housemates. Simultaneously, at the University of Missouri, I was also teaching or co-teaching Introduction to Folklore and Women and Folklore, courses in which foodways were always prominent in the syllabus. Foodways proved especially vivid means to illustrate to college students how diverse their traditions were, even if they initially thought their traditions were homogenous. Years later, as the director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program, I knew it was imperative that we include a foodways chapter in our elementary school educators' guide.

After years within the Rogers family, my circle of gardening friends, and as a folklorist, I can see that my plate is fuller and more colorful. I find myself taking home yellow squash, zucchini, and okra from the in-laws' garden and cooking them on autopilot. I can almost somatically recall how my mom and grandmothers cooked. Before law school, my spouse worked in two cooperative grocery stores—one in Minneapolis and the other in Atlanta—two more occasions when I learned about more ethical food sources and to eat a bit less conservatively. At my house today, we typically only grow a handful of tomato plants and some herbs; however, we strive to shop as often as possible at farmers' markets and two independent grocers that support regional farmers. Our household commitment to foodways has shifted, as we also support organizations like the [Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture](#), especially in their mission to provide fresh, local food in spaces and for people who have little access. I want our neighbors across our small city to have opportunities like Melon and Puck—to sow, plant, harvest, and eat better food.

An ever-curious folklorist and evolving foodie, Lisa recognized, simply based on photographs posted on social media and texts, that Kate and family immersed themselves in curricula infused with farming and vice versa, at home and in their new community. Currently ten and eight years old, Melon and Puck spend a lot of time with their parents tending the farm, amending soil, weeding, planting, picking, gathering, and more. The whole family is regularly covered in dirt, whether a fine layer of dust or smudges of mud. The children are frequently photographed holding freshly picked vegetables or making a simple meal with the harvest. For visitors to the farm, Melon and Puck are capable, thorough, and accurate as they give tours of their fields, their poultry yard, and their horse barn.

Inside the house, Melon and Puck have their own desks and a computer station where they complete more conventional morning lessons, but Kate truly immerses their lessons in their everyday lives, and their everyday lives revolve around their land and its bounty.

The gardens naturally incorporate themselves into the learning of kids who get to work in them, but I intentionally use the gardens on a regular basis.²

The land was actually so integral to our lives, from our routines to their schooling, that I don't even know where to bite this elephant: The garden is more than just science class, catching bugs, shaking soil in jars to make the types separate, slicing stuff to put under the microscope, identifying plants, etc. The soil and the tending of the plants are part of the story of the food that is put on the table or shared with friends.

So, let me go back to our farm here [in Georgia], the food we grow, and the way we have used that as a teaching tool. We teach that we are part of a whole. The treatment/stewardship of the smallest elements, microbiome (soil, human, etc.), water, air, matter to the whole. We teach this literally by teaching ecology, but also in ethics and even sociology. Life cycles, nutrient cycles, basic responsibility . . . there is so much.

We have used our sales and the market to teach the kids about economics and value. Melon [nine years old at the time] and her two friends had a homemade dog treat business for the 2017 market season. They had to fill out paperwork, save receipts, find recipes, source ingredients, schedule time to make them all, worry about storage, price it all to make money, deal with customers, and manage all the finances.

We also tackle issues like slavery and forced labor in the supply chain, labeling, and ethical sourcing certifications.

We use food to teach culture. It is easy when it is another culture, far away, and with deep food roots, but we also teach about locality and seasonality, shaping what is traditional here. Local food culture is less obvious with our current supply chain and the transformation of food with the introduction of convenience foods, but the prevalence of okra, citrus, and po' boys still speaks to regional specialty.

The kids know how to forage in our area. They know about climate change and regional adaptation. This all informs their growing political awareness.

Conversations around the table are often heuristic, a series of questions that encourage the children to apply the knowledge they have acquired in their own backyard, at the market, and in community with other homesteading families. Books and the Internet are appropriate resources. Kate notes that [Georgia Organics](#) is a rich resource, often a first stop when she is looking for curriculum,



Melon Rogers plants seeds at her family's farm.

Photo by Kate Haag Rogers.

lesson plans, and activities. The site has a dedicated page for PreK–12 education resources, with videos, guides, and links to funding opportunities. Kate’s family is full of voracious readers, and they often read together, finding the children like Michael Pollan’s [*The Omnivore’s Dilemma: Young Readers Edition*](#). Pollan’s website is also a resource, with FAQs and useful links. Kate, family, and the homestead guild use both sites in their local public schools and broader community food efforts.

This focus on food education and advocacy helps the children (and our whole extended family) to see the world through narratives of interconnectedness and inclusion. Our “tree of connections” grows taller, deeper, but sometimes withers. Our individual and family tables have shifted, waxing and waning over the years. New places and soils have been incorporated; new family and friends have been made. Diets have been tailored, the food system has morphed, and locations have been added. Our stories remain a critical focal point. With each dish, each variety, the narrative expands, and the opportunities for educating the next generation grow. We recognize, accept, and often relish the dynamism of our family traditions.

Lisa L. Higgins is Director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program, based at the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri. She also serves as the Folk Arts Grant Specialist for the Missouri Arts Council.

Katherine Haag Rogers is a writer, community educator, rural communication strategist, and ethical food advocate. She recently relocated to the Midwest and continues her focus on food policy and rural development.

Endnotes

1. At Kate and her husband’s wedding reception, our in-laws pulled the couple aside and handed them a recipe for the family’s mustard, a deeply held secret. Our spouses’ great-grandmother, Daisy Belle (1901-1978), owned and operated restaurants in Hamilton and Kingston, Missouri, where a menu favorite was ham sandwiches with the homemade spicy mustard. Puck knows that when he and his sister achieve similar milestones, like their father and their aunt, someone in the family will pull them aside and entrust them with the recipe and its story.
2. Kate notes that she also blogged about this topic in 2016: <https://katyhadalittlefarm.com/2016/04/29/educating-children-in-the-garden-it-isnt-just-for-homeschoolers-we-owe-it-to-the-next-generation>.

URLS

<https://foodandculture.org/center-projects/activity-guides-community-foodways-northwest-ohio>
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